Charlie Rominger

AH Rominger & Sons, Yolo County

JOHN ANDERSON

Allen Garcia

Family Farms, Glenn County

DAVID ROSEN/DUCKS UNLIMITED

(Above) The Romingers have built more than a dozen tailwater ponds on their farm (Bruce, left, and Charlie, right). (Right) Allen Garcia views wetlands he's created using tailwater pond systems.

Creating Tailwater Ponds

Romingers and Garcias have farmed Sacramento Valley soils for several generations. Today Charlie Rominger and his family farm 5,000 acres along the Yolo County foothills, growing wheat, rice, corn, alfalfa, beets, tomatoes, and other row crops. Allen Garcia's 900 acres in Glenn County are devoted solely to rice. It seems these operations couldn't be more different. But both men are known for their farming and wildlife successes because of their innovative use of tailwater ponds.

It was hunting on his family's ranch that first got Charlie Rominger thinking about wildlife. "When I was young we could always count on finding pheasants in a multi flora rose patch near some irrigated fields and there were often ducks on our livestock ponds."

Rominger's vision grew from these recollections. When the price of wheat fell during the 1980s, he looked into the federal Conservation Reserve Program and today, the family has 1,400 acres enrolled in CRP. Since CRP lands can be managed for wildlife, he built a few ponds, put in some trees and grasses, and in no time there were ducks.

"Since then we've built over a dozen hill ponds on reserve program lands. In the fall the dozer is available and there's time to keep people busy on these projects." His most recent project, a 15-acre hill pond, was constructed with financial and technical assistance from the Conservation Reserve Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Wildlife Program.

Several tailwater ponds on actively-farmed parcels incidentally provide outstanding habitat for wildlife—but their first function is to conserve water. "In dry years we can irrigate a lot more acres with return systems. Some of our return systems have been operating for 20 years without problems."

Similarly, Allen Garcia's lush ponds, spring-fed hollows, and seasonal creeks may look like a wetland refuge but they're really a central part of his rice-farming operation.

The land has not always looked this way. Through programs offered by the Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Garcia has encouraged vegetation bordering seasonal creeks and channels and developed seven tailwater ponds to improve his marginal soils, reduce soil erosion, and improve rice yields. Incidentally, his rice paddies and winter-flooded fields became a haven for wildlife.

"Sometimes you can come out here and see 500 acres of geese. While feeding in my fields, the waterfowl break down the rice stubble and leave behind fertilizer. It's a system that's been working in China for thousands of years."

His tailwater pond system takes advantage of the land's natural topography and gravity. When water reaches the lowest pond, it's pumped back to the highest pond and recirculated through the rice paddies. During wet winters the ponds fill with runoff. In dry years Garcia must purchase water and recently, when the cost of purchasing water skyrocketed from $3 to $30 an acre foot, Garcia's recovery system saved him a lot of money.

Garcia's and Rominger's tailwater ponds have brought wildlife to their farms and won each recognition with the Central Valley Habitat Joint Venture's Innovative Farmer Award.